Committee on Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations

"Fostering Democracy in the Middle East: Defeating Terrorism with Ballots"
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to speak this morning. I am truly honored to be among such distinguished company. The powerful title of this morning's hearing, "Fostering Democracy in the Middle East: Defeating Terrorism with Ballots," underscores the critical role that freedom and democracy can play in countering terrorism and extremism in this troubled region. Indeed, in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, the world turned its attention to the Middle East's longstanding democracy deficit. With the Pentagon in flames and the Twin Towers collapsing, the horror of that day initiated deeper reflection—both here in the United States, and eventually in the Arab world, about the roots of such a horrendous act.

Over the past few years, international and regional interest has focused intensely on the Middle East's urgent need for reform. The region's stagnation dates back decades, yet, until the 2001 attacks, these longstanding ills received scant attention from governments in the region or their global counterparts. The 9/11 attacks and subsequent terrorist operations (Madrid, Istanbul, Casablanca, Riyadh) shattered the conventional wisdom that the region's stability—anchored by its authoritarian governments—could endure indefinitely and would come at little cost to U.S. interests. Precisely the opposite conclusion has become apparent: Middle East reform is critical for long-term regional stability and broader international security. Absent change, the status quo will only breed greater popular disaffection and provide fertile ground for the continued growth of extremism.

In advance of today's hearing, you provided a number of probing and complex questions focused on two key issues: first, the region's ripeness for reform, and second, the Bush Administration's role (past, present, and future) in responding to the critical need for Middle East reform. I will devote the majority of my testimony to the first question, an area that I have studied over time, first as an analyst with the State Department and subsequently as an independent consultant. In particular, I will draw from a recent Special Report I wrote for the U.S. Institute of Peace that explores the multitude of reform initiatives emanating from the Arab world. I want to add that the views I express are my own and not necessarily those of the Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

The Region's Democracy Deficit

The absence of freedom in the Middle East is well-documented. Freedom House, in its most recent survey, notes that the region is distinguished from the rest of the world by its distinct

lack of political rights and civil liberties. Only six percent of the states in the Middle East and North Africa are classified as "Free," in contrast to the fifty percent of Free states in the rest of the world. Over the past thirty years, the Middle East and North Africa have registered no significant progress toward democratic opening. The report notes that "downward trends have outpaced gains post 9/11," with notable setbacks in 2004 in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. In some instances, regimes in the region have resorted to wide-ranging repressive practices in the name of fighting the Global War on Terror. Such policies often result in an increase in human rights violations and the overall suppression of dissent, even when peaceful.

An Arab "awakening" to the need for reform has taken place as well. In July, 2002, less than a year after the September 11th attacks, a UN-commissioned panel of thirty Arab experts from a variety of disciplines issued the first Arab Human Development Report. The report, which was commissioned *before* the attacks, presents a sobering picture of the Arab world. In blunt language, the AHDR issues a probing, self-critical analysis of the region's shortfalls; it offers an instance of deeper introspection that many outside the region complained had been missing just after the attacks. Specifically, the paper outlines three key deficits—freedom, women's empowerment, and knowledge—that impede the Arab world from achieving its true potential, effectively isolating it from the rest of the world. The report concludes with a clarion call for reform, depicting the Arab world at a "crossroads" and casting the region's choices in stark terms: its governments can either continue with the status quo, perpetuating repressive practices and ineffective policies that do not meet the region's daunting challenges, or they can strive for an "Arab renaissance, anchored in human development."

Last month, the UN published the third Arab Human Development Report devoted entirely to the question of freedom and good governance in the Arab world. The report offers a detailed analysis of the region's gaps in political freedoms and concludes with a series of recommendations for political and legal reforms. It directly addresses complex issues such as the role of religion and culture, calling unambiguously for the application of universal democratic principles while respecting the unique role these forces play in the region.

An Arab Thirst for Freedom

While the Arab world's lack of political freedom and democracy is well-documented and acknowledged by Westerners and Arabs alike, the region's democracy deficit should not be misinterpreted as a lack of desire or capacity for greater opening and reform on the part of its citizens. Numerous polls and surveys verify the Arab public's hunger for freedom and democracy. A 2002 poll conducted by U.S. pollster James Zogby, head of the Arab American Institute, surveyed 3,200 people in eight Arab countries. Between 90 and 96 percent of the respondents rated "civil and personal rights" as their highest priority among a list of potential concerns that included personal economic conditions, health care, and moral standards. Perhaps even more compelling, analysis of data from the 2001 World Values Survey (WVS) reveals that of the nine cultural zones surveyed (including Europe and the United States), Arab countries had the *highest* percentage of publics (61 percent) who

agreed strongly that "Democracy may have many problems, but it's better than any other form of government."

Indeed, the WVS underscores that openness to values that place an emphasis on the secular and rational, as opposed to traditional and survival values, appears to correlate more closely with a country's level of economic development and historical experience, rather than religion. WVS data finds that Saudi Arabia, governed by an absolute monarchy whose authority is anchored in one of the most conservative strains of Islam, does not have the most traditional value system of any Islamic country. Instead, the Saudi public places greater value on self-expression values than any other Islamic public.

Beyond the polling results, other data coupled with certain key concepts in Islam suggest that there is not necessarily an inherent contradiction between Islam and democracy. First, there are examples of countries with significant Muslim populations that are considered electoral democracies. These include Turkey, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mali and Senegal. In fact, approximately half of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims live in electoral democracies. Indeed, according to Freedom House, 73 percent of Muslims living outside the Middle East and North Africa live in Free or Partly Free countries, as compared to 12 percent of Muslims from the region.

Second, notable principles within Islam can propel a democratic ethos. Specifically, the concept of *shura* or consultative decision-making could serve as an important cornerstone for the inception of democratic processes. If revived, the Islamic practice of *ijtihad*, or interpretation and reasoning based on the sacred texts, could inject greater vitality into the religion and allow for modern interpretations of issues related to democracy and governance.

The absence of freedom in the Middle East does not appear to have precluded many of its people from embracing the hope for democratic reforms. Indeed, intense international interest directed at the need for Middle East reform has helped to initiate an unprecedented dialogue over reform in the region. From Morocco to Saudi Arabia and beyond, governments, non-government groups (both secular and Islamist), the media and others have joined an often freewheeling discussion about the need for change. Further, the debate has penetrated popular discourse from television call-in shows to Internet chat rooms and weblogs, injecting a populist element into the dialogue.

Arab Reform Initiatives

The boldest and most detailed reform proposals originating in the Arab world have emerged from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Beginning in January 2004, a diverse array of groups ranging from the Arab Business Council to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has published a variety of reform initiatives. The platforms vary, at times significantly, in degree of specificity, scope, seriousness, and independence. Most significantly, many of these reform initiatives have advocated forcefully for political reform.

The reform initiatives share key common demands. These include calls for free and fair elections; constitutional reforms that feature a diminishing of executive power and commensurate increase in legislative and judicial powers; the repeal of emergency laws and the abolishment of exceptional courts; an end to the practice of torture; and the lifting of restrictions on civil society, NGOs, and the media.

In contrast, government and multilateral reform proposals may provide entry points for pressing for more substantial democratic change, but fall short of meaningful, deeply-rooted and sustained reform. Instead, government measures typically appear designed to relieve popular pressure at home or assuage critics abroad, while leaving the power equation unaltered. As a result, political openings resulting from government reform efforts remain tenuous and fragile, subject to the whims of those in power. Indeed, most government-sponsored initiatives appear motivated by self-preservation and a desire to maintain the status quo rather than any intention to implement genuine change.

To be successful, any reform effort must be inclusive, reaching out to all elements of society, including moderate Islamists who likely constitute the region's most potent opposition force. Yet with few exceptions, joint reform efforts that bring together secular and Islamist reformers, are rare. In this regard, two NGO-sponsored initiatives stand out: the June 2004 Doha Declaration and the March 2004 Beirut Civil Forum. The Doha Declaration calls for the creation of "national pacts" that could bridge secular and Islamist demands for reform and possibly galvanize the reform movement. The "national pact" concept is important for two key reasons: first, by uniting secular and Islamist reformers, demands for reform could gain critical mass, accelerating the momentum for change. Second, if constructed in good faith, these pacts could go a long way toward clarifying worrisome ambiguities that often divide those calling for reform and that put governments on the defensive.

The Beirut Civil Forum highlights the importance of initiating a religious dialogue within the Muslim Arab community. The document calls on governments to review both religious and nonreligious educational curricula in order to inject more innovative thinking. By the same token, it appeals to Islamic scholars (*ulama*) and thinkers to debate the theological underpinnings of terrorism, extremism, and violence. The document also urges those in academe and the media to examine and open forums for discussion of the work of religious innovators (*mujaddadun diniyun*) in Arab society.

The Civil Forum is important because it directly addresses the role of Islam within the region and offers constructive suggestions for promoting dialogue on this critical matter. The initiative appears to make important distinctions between radicals and moderates. Its recommendations look to marginalize violent extremist elements, while allowing for the participation of peaceful moderates. The forum seeks to embark on a dialogue to renew (reform) Islam with the full participation of all its adherents: clerics, scholars, imams, Muslim thinkers, journalists and academics. It highlights the important role debate and dialogue will play in addressing critical issues related to violence, extremism, and terrorism.

Implications for U.S. Policy.

In closing, it is useful to consider the implications for U.S. policy. To date, the Bush administration's focus on Middle East reform at a minimum has energized discussion of the issue in the region. For all of its controversy, the U.S. invasion of Iraq may have contributed indirectly to numerous developments in the region, from the "Cedar Revolution" in the streets of Beirut to Cairo's regular *Kifaya* (Enough) demonstrations, to the first nationwide elections in Saudi Arabia in decades.

Still, several significant challenges remain:

- **Bolstering U.S. credibility in the region stands as a key priority for policy makers.** U.S. favorability ratings in the region continue to hover near all-time lows, impinging on the United States' influence and its ability to effect change in the Middle East. Restoring and strengthening U.S. credibility in the region should be *the* primary objective for U.S. policy makers.
- **The administration must determine how to reconcile the well-documented need for change in the region with longstanding desires for stability.** U.S. policy makers should raise the urgent need for reform at the bilateral level. Consistent yet quiet diplomatic pressure, coupled with a variety of enticements (e.g., increased aid, enhanced market access) for positive movement on reform offers the greatest chance of success. Both Washington and diplomats in the field must signal that reform is a key U.S. interest by repeatedly pressing for the release of imprisoned reformers, an end to press censorship, and the cessation of repressive emergency laws.
- **Engagement with moderate Islamist reformers is essential.** Given the Islamists' strong popular appeal, the United States can no longer afford to call for democratic change in the region while ignoring one of its most powerful political forces. The United States should underscore the commonalities among the demands of secular and Islamist reformers, leveraging the overlap between them to inject greater momentum toward broad reform in the region.
- **U.S. policy makers need to harmonize U.S. policies in support of the Global War on Terror with the desire to promote reform.** In the past, regional regimes were sent mixed messages. U.S. officials applauded security and intelligence cooperation from Arab governments. Yet, crackdowns on suspected terrorists often result in human rights violations and an increase in repression. A successful policy promoting reform must answer the vexing question of how to nurture civil society while guarding against extremism.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing today on such an important issue. The movement toward political reform in this critical region of the world will not be easy, quick, or without difficulties. But, it is necessary and must be sustained. The long-term stability of the region, which is in everyone's interests, is at stake. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

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